

Sexualizing Reality Television:
Associations with Trait and State Self-Objectification

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Abstract

Two studies combining cross-sectional and daily experience methods tested whether watching sexualizing reality television is associated with self-objectification in women. In Study 1, an online survey of 495 undergraduate women, we demonstrated that watching sexualizing reality television was associated with higher levels of *trait* self-objectification. In Study 2, an online daily experience study of 94 undergraduate women, we extended the results from Study 1 by focusing on *state* self-objectification and showed that changes in daily exposure to sexualizing reality television correspond to fluctuations in the importance participants attached to appearance, but were unrelated to the importance attached to body-competence. The results of these two studies with multiple methods provide support for the influence of exposure to sexualizing reality television to the development of an objectified self-concept but also underline differences in how exposure to sexualizing reality television relates to trait and state self-objectification.

Keywords: self-objectification, reality television, sexualization, appearance, competence

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Reality television programs, such as *Jersey Shore* and *The Kardashians*, are understudied in media literature, although important to investigate because of their high popularity among young audiences (Bond & Drogos, 2014). Moreover, they also hold high potential to influence viewers because of the suggested “reality nature” of the programming (Beck, Hellmueller, & Aeschbacher, 2012), and their strong emphasis on sexualized messages (Vandenbosch, Vervloessem, & Eggermont, 2013). The American Psychological Association (APA) (2010) describes sexualization as: evaluating individuals based on their sexual appeal/behavior, equating standards of appearance to being sexually attractive, sexual objectification, and/or inappropriately imposing sexuality on individuals. Two out of ten scenes in reality shows contain sexualizing messages (Vandenbosch et al., 2013). The most frequent types are the messages which equate sexual attractiveness (for women) with having a slim, well-shaped body while disregarding the character’s personality (Vandenbosch et al., 2013).

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) argues that treating individuals as sexual bodies while ignoring their personality (described as sexual objectification in the original theory, but more recently also as sexualization; see Ward, Reed, Trinh, & Foust, 2014) triggers an objectified self-perspective, in which individuals apply an observer’s perspective to their own body. This *self-objectification* creates a variety of health risks for young women, including an increased likelihood of depression, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunction (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Although there is empirical support for many aspects of objectification theory (Moradi & Huang, 2008), no study has yet explored the link between sexualizing reality television and self-objectification. By applying a unique design that combines cross-sectional and daily

experience methods, the current research investigates the role of reality television in the development of *trait self-objectification* (Study 1) and *state self-objectification* (Study 2).

Trait self-objectification refers to individual differences in self-objectification that are rather stable across situations (Aubrey, 2006a, 2006b; Moradi & Huang, 2008). State self-objectification refers to within-person, context-dependent differences in applying an objectifying self-perspective (Moradi & Huang, 2008). For instance, on days when a woman watches sexualizing reality television, her state-self objectification is expected to be higher than on days when she is not exposed. Priming literature explains that exposure to (sexualizing) messages temporarily activates particular perceptions (e.g., to perceive oneself from an observer's perspective focusing on appearance; Berkowitz, 1986). In addition, the more frequently these perceptions are activated (e.g., on days that one watches sexualizing reality television and thus has an increased level of state self-objectification), the higher the likelihood that these perceptions become permanently accessible (i.e., trait self-objectification) (Hansen & Hansen, 1988).

Measurement of Trait Self-Objectification

Studies have found that sexualizing media use relates to trait self-objectification (e.g., Aubrey, 2006a). Trait self-objectification is typically measured with Noll and Fredrickson's (1998) Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ), in which participants rank order 12 appearance-based and competence-based body attributes according to personal importance. Self-objectification occurs when participants consider appearance-based attributes as *more important* than competence-based attributes. However, because of misinterpretations of the ranking task (Calogero, 2011), Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012) suggested evaluating the importance of body attributes on a Likert scale which allows researchers to assess the importance of appearance and competence separately.

To date, little is known about how appearance and competence relate to sexualizing media use. Using sexualizing media has been related to valuing appearance over competence (e.g., Aubrey, 2006b), but no study has explored associations with the separate components. We aim to advance this line of inquiry by testing whether the popular, but sexualizing genre of reality television is related to valuing appearance over competence at a trait-level and also by exploring whether this exposure is related to a decrease in valuing of competence or an increase of valuing of appearance. We address this first objective in a cross-sectional study (Study 1) that has the advantage of addressing stable differences between individuals in a large sample.

Measurement of State Self-Objectification

Three experimental studies have documented an association between exposure to sexualizing media and state self-objectification. Two experiments showed that (White) women completed the phrase “I am” more often with appearance-focused words (i.e., Twenty Statements Test) after exposure to sexualizing media, compared to a control group (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003). One of these experiments (Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003) also showed that exposure to sexualizing media did not influence describing oneself less frequently with competence-focused words. A third experiment applied a similar measure of state self-objectification as the adapted SOQ and reported that exposure to sexualizing video clips increased valuing of appearance over competence (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2012). However, associations between media use and the separate components of appearance and competence were not examined.

Furthermore, all three experiments were conducted in a laboratory setting. No study to date has investigated the association between media use and state-self-objectification in a more naturalistic context. Our second objective is to investigate the

link between sexualizing reality television and state self-objectification in a daily experience study (Study 2). Because experiments (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003) suggest that valuing of appearance increases after exposure to sexualizing media, we predict that exposure to sexualizing reality television relates to an increase in valuing appearance. Moreover, we explore whether exposure to sexualizing reality television also relates to valuing appearance over competence and a decrease in valuing competence.

Study 1

Method

Participants and procedure. An online survey on “The everyday life of female college students” was posted on several student fora and social networking sites in Belgium. Ethics approval was received. As payment, participants were entered into a lottery to win a reward card (50€). A total of 495 women ages 18-26 completed the survey.

Exposure to sexualizing reality television. Participants indicated how often they had watched each of 12 reality television programs during the last year (on television, DVD, or online) on a 6-point scale (1 = *(almost) never* to 6 = *(almost) always*). These programs were pre-selected to be sexualizing in nature by three researchers (i.e., the first and third author and a graduate student who received in-depth training). Sexualization was described according to all four indicators of APA (2010). Because the mean score of the 12 programs was rather low, we only included the three most popular programs, i.e., “Geordie shore”, “Astrid in wonderland” and “Zo man, zo vrouw” [So husband, so wife] in the total sum variable of sexualizing reality television.

Trait self-objectification. Using the adapted SOQ (see Vandenberg and Eggermont, 2012 for more information), respondents evaluated the importance of 12

body attributes on a 10-point scale (1 = *not at all important* to 10 = *very important*). To estimate levels of ***valuing of appearance***, and ***valuing of competence***, mean scores on the five appearance-based body attributes and the seven competence-based body attributes were calculated. The difference between the mean scores represented the estimated level of ***valuing appearance over competence*** (range -9 to 9) with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-objectification.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are shown in Table 1. Linear regression analyses in which sexualizing reality television is entered as an independent variable were conducted for each objectification outcome; the *F*-statistic of each model and regression coefficients are reported in Table 2. The results showed that watching sexualizing reality television was significantly associated with valuing appearance over competence. The results remained significant after controlling for age, ethnicity (Caucasian or other), and BMI. The results support our prediction that watching sexualizing reality television is associated with trait self-objectification, and in particular, higher levels of valuing appearance but a lower valuing of competence.

Study 2

Method

Participants and procedure. First-year female college students ($N = 261$) were invited to participate in an online daily experience study on “The everyday life of college students” when attending a course at KU Leuven; 135 women agreed to participate. Participants completed a brief online survey (“diary”) every evening before they went to bed for 14 consecutive days. To motivate participants, their email addresses were entered into a raffle to receive an Ipad mini. Ethics approval was received.

Of the 135 participants, 94 completed the daily diary more than two times and served as the analytical sample: 24.5% of the participants completed the diary 10 or more times and the mean number of completed diaries was 6.60 ($SD = 4.05$; Range 2-14), producing a total of 620 diaries. Using Pillai's Trace, a multivariate analysis of variance showed that there were no significant differences in the background level of self-objectification nor in general estimates of watching reality television between 41 women who completed only one (and were excluded since they could not contribute data to calculate slopes) and 94 women who completed at least two diaries, $p = .34$. Participants had a mean age of 19.65 ($SD = 1.94$; Range 17-27); 95.7% originated from a Western country (Caucasian); and the mean BMI was 21.53 ($SD = 3.03$).

Exposure to sexualizing reality television. Participants reported whether they had watched television each day, and if so, they listed the title and the duration that they viewed each program (0 = 0 minutes, 1 = 15 minutes or less, 2 = 30 minutes, 3 = 60 minutes, 4 = 90 minutes, 5 = 120 minutes, 6 = 150 minutes, 7 = 180 minutes, 8 = 210 minutes, 9 = 240 minutes, 10 = more than 240 minutes). Only reality programs were included in our measure and were coded by three researchers trained in identifying sexualization as defined by the four indicators of APA (2010). Following a similar procedure as Aubrey (2006a) and Vandenberg and Eggermont (2012), the coders answered questions regarding the program on a 5-point scale about the frequency of sexualization, the intensity of sexualization, and the familiarity of the researcher with the program. Based on these questions, a sexualization score for each reality program was calculated. This score was multiplied with the daily duration of viewing that program. To estimate the degree to which the participants were exposed to sexualizing reality programs each day, we calculated their total sum score on all the daily listed (weighted) sexualizing reality programs ($M = 0.43$, $SD = 2.13$).

State self-objectification. Vandenbosch and Eggermont's (2012) adapted version of SOQ was used. The participants rated the importance attached to body attributes each day (instead of in general as for trait self-objectification). Levels of valuing appearance over competence ($M = -0.35$, $SD = 1.65$), valuing of appearance ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.83$), and valuing of competence ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.76$) were calculated as in Study 1.

Results

To account for the non-independence in our data, we used multi-level modeling in SPSS 20.0 to test a two-level model where days are nested within person. To avoid confounding within- and between-person effects, we controlled for the aggregate level of watching sexualizing reality television while focusing on within-person daily changes. The daily variable of watching reality television was person-mean centered (i.e., centered around each participants' own mean), therefore the coefficient can be interpreted as how deviations from the women's own mean time spent watching reality television relate to each objectification outcome (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2004).

As shown in Table 2, the analyses indicated that on days when women watched more sexualized reality television than they did on average, they placed more importance on their appearance. However, deviations in mean time spent watching reality television were not related to changes in valuing competence, and as such there was no significant change in valuing appearance over competence (i.e., state self-objectification). The results remained similar after controlling for age, BMI, ethnicity (of European descent or "other") and number of diary days participants completed.

General Discussion

Consistent with prior research on the role of media in objectification, the current studies demonstrated that *in general* women who watch more sexualizing reality television have higher levels of trait self-objectification (Study 1) and *on days* when women watch sexualizing reality television, they attach more importance to their appearance (Study 2). Two main conclusions can be derived.

First, the findings draw attention to the socializing function that sexualizing reality television plays in acculturating women to focus on their appearance. Reality shows regularly feature messages that equate the well-shaped thin bodies of the main female characters to their sex appeal (Vandenbosch et al., 2013). According to our findings, such messages are likely to heighten the centrality of appearance in women's self-concept. Future research may explore whether reality television is potentially even more influential than other genres because of the perceived realism (Beck et al., 2012).

Second, the results point to differences between associations of sexualizing media exposure with state and trait objectification outcomes. Our cross-sectional study found that more frequent viewing of sexualizing reality television was related to between-person differences in valuing appearance over competence, although, these associations were generally small. A somewhat different conclusion can be drawn when studying the lived, daily experience of women. We found a small, but significant positive relationship between daily exposure to sexualizing reality television and valuing appearance. Daily exposure to sexualizing reality television, however, was unrelated to the valuing of competence or valuing appearance over competence.

Although these results differ from our findings on trait self-objectification, they are in line with research of Harrison and Fredrickson (2003) showing that exposure to sexualizing media increased White women's focus on appearance but did not significantly affect their focus on competence. Moreover, priming theory predicts that

only the schemas that are present in the stimuli will be activated (Berkowitz, 1986). Sexualizing reality television directs one's attention toward appearance, but does not (necessarily) contain messages relating to one's body competence.

Therefore, we suggest that the influence of sexualizing reality television on valuing appearance over competence may take more time. That is, if exposure to sexualizing reality television triggers a repeated state-focus on appearance, a woman may start to describe her identity in terms of appearance and, over time, devalue the importance of body competence. Future research should explore whether repeated incidences of sexualizing reality television that trigger a state-focus on appearance eventually result in trait self-objectification. An interesting future direction would be to identify the factors that protect individuals from developing trait self-objectification. Such moderators may even explain the rather small relationships reported in this study. Although such small relationships are not uncommon in media research (Valkenburg & Peter, 2012), stronger relationships may be found, for instance, in women with lower self-esteem (Aubrey, 2006a) or women with more frequent exposure to sexualization through everyday social interactions. Such research may also explore whether our findings are similar in other populations (e.g., college men or adolescent girls) and in a sample of young women with a higher rate of compliance with the diary study.

In conclusion, the current multi-method study was the first to demonstrate that sexualizing reality television promotes self-objectification in women, and to document that differences in how exposure to sexualizing reality television relates to trait versus state self-objectification occur. By studying the relationships between reality television viewing, and both trait and state self-objectification, the study results suggest a more comprehensive understanding may be reached in how an objectified self-concept develops in young women.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations Among All Relevant Variables in Study 1

	Descriptive statistics			Zero-order correlations					
	<i>M or %</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	Self-objectification	Valuing appearance	Valuing competence	BMI	Age	Ethnicity
Sexualizing reality television	8.04	3.54	---	.23***	.13*	-.14**	.02	-.11*	-.00
Self-objectification	0.30	1.44	---	---	.57***	-.59***	-.06	-.04	.01
Valuing appearance	7.03	1.23	.72		---	.33***	-.01	.07	.02
Valuing competence	6.73	1.25	.82			---	.06	.11*	.01
BMI	21.50	2.52	---				---	.01	-.03
Age	20.26	1.18	---					---	-.05
Ethnicity	95.4%	---	---						---

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2

Results of Linear Regression Analysis (Study 1) and Multi-Level Analysis (Study 2)

Study 1	Self-objectification			Valuing appearance			Valuing competence		
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>
Sexualizing reality television	0.09	5.07	.23***	0.04	2.82	.13*	-0.05	-2.94	-.13**
BMI	-0.04	-1.42	-.06	-0.01	-0.21	-.01	0.03	1.40	.06
Age	-0.02	-0.32	-.01	0.09	1.87	.08	0.10	2.20	.10*
Ethnicity	0.03	0.10	-.01	0.12	0.46	.02	0.09	0.34	.02
ΔR^2 (= adjusted)			.05			.01			.03
ΔF			7.07			2.64			4.25
<i>p</i> -value			<.001			.05			.002
<i>df</i>			4, 486			4, 486			4, 486
Study 2	Self-objectification			Valuing appearance			Valuing competence		
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Sexualizing reality television	0.03	1.40	512.19	0.04*	2.06	511.89	0.01	0.51	512.04
BMI	-0.01	-0.20	84.22	-0.00	-0.01	85.21	0.01	0.18	85.38
Age	-0.02	0.24	79.90	0.16	1.84	82.78	0.14	1.69	83.00
Ethnicity	0.44	0.60	93.84	-0.55	-0.63	90.50	-0.98	-1.14	90.55
Number of completed diary days	-0.06	-1.81	84.41	-0.11*	-2.51	85.15	-0.04	-1.02	85.32

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$, *** $p < .001$